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U.S. Documents Moscow's Use Of Slave Labor

The Reagan administration is about to release an official report that will indict the Soviet Union for widespread use of slave labor.

The report is the result of months of study by experts from the White House, CIA, Pentagon and State and Labor departments. Their findings will come as no surprise to anyone who has plowed through Alexander Solzhenitsyn's "Gulag Archipelago," but the report will give the U.S. government's imprimatur to disclosures of political and religious persecution throughout Soviet society.

The study was made in response to an inquiry by Sen. William L. Armstrong (R-Colo.). He wanted to know if forced labor was being used to build the natural gas pipeline from Siberia to western Europe.

As it happened, the intelligence on that specific project was scant, and the experts disagreed over exactly what constituted work on the pipeline, sources told my associate Lucette Lagnado. So the interagency group decided to expand its study to include all Soviet slave labor and put the whole issue on the record.

The experts estimate that there are about 4 million slave laborers in the workers' paradise, a huge drop from the 20 million historians figure were enslaved by Stalin. Although superficial changes have been made in the past 30 years, forced labor is still an important factor in the Soviet economy, and it is still used as a weapon against political and religious dissidents.

The report illustrates the lawyerly techniques used by the authorities to deny civil rights supposedly guaranteed to Soviet citizens. Free speech, for example, is obliterated by a law making it a crime to "libel" the Soviet system—a blanket term that includes any form of outspoken dissent.

A particularly useful Catch-22 is the charge of "parasitism," which is used when a dissident is prevented by the authorities from holding a job and then arrested for not working.

The interagency report documents individual cases of Soviet dissenters railroaded into the labor camps on questionable grounds. Here are a few cited in the report:

- Ilya Zviagin was charged with disseminating two documents that allegedly libeled the Soviet system. He was convicted and sentenced to two years' forced labor—even though the documents in question weren't presented as evidence in court.

- Herbert Murd, an Estonian Methodist, was convicted for doing church work among young people. He was released after a year at forced labor, but was soon rearrested for failure to pay alimony—a failure that was due directly to his inability to hold a job because the authorities repeatedly had him fired. He was eventually convicted of "parasitism."

- Georgiy Mikhailov was an amateur art collector sentenced to four years for engaging in a prohibited occupation. He was accused of selling art slides to friends, but his real "crime" was patronizing artists the authorities disapproved of. He was convicted even though the prosecution's expert witness refused to testify that Mikhailov had engaged in prohibited activity.

- Ida Nudel, who was vociferous and persistent in her criticism of the authorities, recently completed a four-year sentence in Siberia. But she is forbidden to return to her home in Moscow, and is forced to wander around the country looking for places to live—a fate that has befallen other political dissidents who manage to survive their stay in the gulag.

- Alexander Paritskiy was an oceanologist sentenced to three years' forced labor on charges of "slandorous politics." His real offense was trying to emigrate to Israel.